

“The Easter in Us”
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April 1, 2018
UU Congregation of Danbury

Today is Easter Sunday. For Unitarian Universalists, this day offers an abundance of stories and myths that challenge us in our thinking. This season is a perfect example of how Unitarian Universalists draw from many sources for the traditions we share. Our hearts are moved by all that we cannot understand, even as our minds try to make sense of this season.

Easter was originally the festival of Eostre, an Anglo-Saxon goddess of the dawn. Eostre took place at the spring equinox. It was a time to call forth the sun god from the underworld of winter.

Back in the days before people came to understand the changing seasons, they did not know that after the dead of winter the spring warmth would return to the earth. Ancient people were *afraid* the earth was dying. They were *afraid* that they would not have enough to eat to keep themselves alive. When the warmer days returned, and the crops began to grow once again, the people celebrated. They created rituals and stories to encourage the coming of spring. They believed they initiated the changing season by the ways in which they chose to celebrate.

Today is also the second day of Passover, a Feast celebrated by Jews in this season. Passover retells the story of the Jews escape from Egypt and oppression more than 3,000 years ago. Passover emphasizes that freedom does not come easily. There was a great deal of *fear* and bitterness among the Jews as they followed Moses out of Egypt. Each year at the Passover Seder, Jews celebrate the gift of freedom by recounting the story of their release from slavery.

When Jesus of Nazareth came along, more than 2000 years ago, it was into a culture that still practiced the ancient traditions and rituals. Jesus was a Jewish man who taught that keeping the spirit of the law was more important than obeying the letter of the law. Jesus taught that the most important commandment is to love one another.

As a Jew, Jesus participated in festivals like Passover. It was at the Passover Seder in Jerusalem – what Christians refer to as The Last Supper – that Jesus instructed his followers to continue his work in remembrance of him.

Christians celebrate Easter as the promise of eternal life. Easter marks the rebirth of Jesus in their lives. Jesus was crucified because people were *afraid* he would overthrow the government and change their religious ways. After his death, his body was placed in a tomb. In the New Testament, the Gospel of Mark tells us:

On the first day of the week, at early dawn they came to the tomb, saying:
Who will roll away the stone from the entrance to the tomb?
They looked up and saw that the stone had already been rolled back, and on the right they saw a young man. They were alarmed. But the man said to them:
‘Why do you seek the living among the dead?’
So they went out and fled from the tomb, for terror and amazement had seized them.
And they said nothing, for they were *afraid*. (from Mark 16, RSV)

When Unitarian Universalists describe what Easter means to us, we hear parts of all the stories. Easter is a celebration of life. It celebrates the rebirth of the earth, the renewal of the human spirit. My colleague, Gordon McKeeman, suggests that Easter is a reminder of “the persistence, (and) the ongoingness of the mystery we call life... it is revealed to us once again that life arises out of death.” (from “Consider the Rainbows: A Kind Word for Mortality,” Easter sermon, April 3, 1983)

What *I* hear in these stories is the human response to change: *fear*. The ancient people were *afraid* that the earth would not replenish itself for their survival; the Hebrews *feared* for their lives as they fled from Egypt; Jesus was crucified because people were *afraid* he would lead a rebellion and upset the way things were; the visitors at the tomb fled silently, for they were *afraid*.

For me, Easter acknowledges the ability of the human spirit to rise above life’s tragedies and difficulties. Easter affirms our strength to hope and to love – even – or perhaps especially – in the face of fear. It represents the change in seasons, both within us, and in the world around us. Easter is a season in which our faith in life is put to the test.

As a Catholic girl, I took very seriously the various seasons of the church year. The forty days before Easter, known as Lent, were probably most important to me. During Lent we were encouraged to make some change in our lives. We usually gave up eating candy or watching television. My parents gave up drinking alcohol during Lent. We might also do something we wouldn’t normally do during those forty days. One year I went to 6 a.m. Mass every morning. The Lenten season was a time set aside to prepare for the celebration of Easter. And, we prepared for Easter by changing ourselves inside.

An outward sign of Easter – in my family, at least – was the wearing of new spring clothes to church. My sister and I always wore matching outfits that had been made by my grandmother, as did all my girl cousins (except for Barbara who insisted on wearing her usual tee shirt and jeans). We even wore new hats. My Dad bought us corsages that matched our outfits. My brothers wore new (itchy) suits and ties. After church, we visited grandparents and sometimes saw cousins dressed in their Easter finery. When the public display of Easter was completed, we put away our nice clothes so we wouldn’t ruin them. Since we usually felt deprived after giving up something we liked for Lent, we then indulged ourselves by eating Easter candy. (The hard-boiled eggs we had colored were eaten for what seems like months after Easter.) My parents resumed drinking alcohol, and life remained essentially unchanged in the O’Keefe household after the newness of Easter had worn off. You see, once Easter arrived, everything reverted back to the way it had been forty days earlier. For me, Easter marked an ending, not the beginning of new life. The external aspects of Easter remained – our new clothes were a sign of that – but inside of us, life was unchanged.

When Unitarian Universalist minister, Max Coots, wrote *Seasons of the Self*, he included these impressions of “Easter”:

I know there’s truth in myths, but I know what I know...

I cannot be content to celebrate some ancient resurrection and think it’s done, completed, over with.

Life goes on and on.

Life will not stay content at any time of place or mind...

If understood as parables and parallels to our own waking up and coming back to life—

If transferred from altars and garden plots to our own lives, the worlds of Spring that priests preach and robins sing become sensible for us again.

We need Passover and *we need* Spring;

Easter and a sense of God Incarnate in the least of these: myself and you.

We need to know more than just that old men thought that old gods rose again.

And more than that every year some April comes and leaves a flowering shrub and warms the rain.

We need the sense of deity to crack our own hard, brown December husks and push life out of inner tombs and outer pain.

Unless we move the seasons of the self, and Spring can come for us, the Winter will go on and on.

And Easter will remain a myth, and life will never come again,

Despite the fact of Spring. (Max Coats, from *Seasons of the Self*)

*Unless we move the seasons of the self...
the Winter will go on and on...*

Whether or not we believe in the factual truth of the Easter and Passover stories, we are invited to experience “our own waking up and coming back to life” in this season. Unless we are willing to push through our fear to make sustainable changes in our lives, “Easter will remain a myth, and life will never come again.”

Easter is more than just a day or a season. It is an ongoing reminder of life’s purpose. In all the stories about this season, the people responded with fear to the changes they experienced. But they turned that fear into an affirmation of life. There is a need at this time of year to mark the changing seasons. It is no accident that the spring celebrations share common elements. Rebirth, release from oppression, and the promise of life everlasting are celebrated to help us overcome our fear. But unless we experience a change of heart within ourselves, the season will leave us right where we’ve always been – stuck – in the winter of our lives.

The stories about spring and Easter help us to understand the ongoingness of life. But they do more than that. The stories and rituals are intended to connect us to the cyclical nature of the seasons. Unlike the ancient peoples, we know that the earth will bring forth new life – eventually. But like those people, we need to celebrate the changes we witness and encourage ourselves for the next season of our lives.

Like the Hebrews led out of Egypt, we may fear the unknown. We may have difficulty trusting that we will survive in the wilderness and live in freedom.

Like the women at the tomb of Jesus, we may fear what we cannot comprehend. The fear sends us off, unable to speak, unable to act in the ways we have been taught by someone we cherished – even when we believe in his truth.

There is evidence that fear is the first experience of a fetus living in the womb. Fear also follows the terror of the birth experience. Is it any wonder that fear is the immediate response to an experience of something new and unknown? With each re-birth, we react with fear from some place deep inside. The fear may shake our sense of well-being and comfort. But it need

not keep us from moving forward. The fear can be countered with the hope that we are moving toward something better. At the very least, we are moving toward something different.

The markers we see in the changing season are indicators of what can happen within us. When we note the cycling seasons, the doubt and fear that accompany change might actually encourage us to turn inward for strength and answers. What “is revealed to us once again (is) that life arises out of death.” (Gordon McKeeman)

As Unitarian Universalists, we may not be comfortable with the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We may not believe the message Jesus conveyed through his life and death – that suffering is inevitable in human life, and that through suffering we will find the release from it. We are often hard-pressed to find hope in suffering. Anyone who has watched a loved one survive a stroke that leaves him or her incapacitated knows the futility of such hope. But perhaps the suffering can help us find new meaning for our lives, in ways that enable us to change ourselves. No amount of paralyzing fear will prevent change. But perhaps the evidence of Easter outside will encourage its presence within us.

We cannot have life without death. As Gordon McKeeman reminded me when my father died:

*... death enhances life values by reminding us that they are limited, not endless.
Things that are endless also tend to be valueless.* (personal correspondence)

Easter offers us the opportunity to take the symbols of the season into our own hearts. We might begin by examining the areas of our lives that would benefit from some change. This examination may evoke feelings of grief and anger at that which is no longer acceptable to us. Most likely, the prospect of change will evoke fear, perhaps mingled with hope. It is then that the work of Easter begins.

Like the sprouts of green that are dying to blossom, we must push ourselves up out of the winter earth. We must move out of the darkness of the tomb, and into the freedom of the unknown Promised Land. The Easter in us is begging to be born – and re-born – again and again. Easter is not a “once upon a time” done deal. It is about the here and now. Easter is not about what happened to someone else. It is about us. It’s about our place in the cycle of life. Easter represents a change of heart, and ultimately transformation from the people we were into the people we are becoming.
Unless we learn to

move the seasons of the self...
the Winter will go on and on...
Despite the fact of Spring. (Max Coats)

Spring for awakening,
Passover for freedom,
Easter for hope against hope –
all for love. (Greta Crosby)

May this Easter bring you the hope, the courage, and the love, to welcome this season of new life into your hearts. And may you be forever changed.